

## Sunday's election confirms that a majority of Catalans support independence, but there are deep divisions over what an independent Catalonia should look like.



*A majority of seats in the Catalan Parliament are now held by parties with a commitment to holding a referendum on independence. **Joan Costa i Font** writes that while there is a clear mandate for putting a referendum to the population, there is little agreement between parties on how a Catalanian state should be organised. A key priority for the independence movement should be to define the ways in which independence could improve the lives of citizens, and to provide concrete proposals on issues like the Catalan welfare state.*

Last Sunday's regional elections in Catalonia transcend Spanish domestic affairs. For the first time in the young Spanish democracy's history, opinion polls suggest a significant rise in support (currently at 57 per cent) for the secession of Catalonia from Spain, which exceeds by far the support **Scottish independence** seems to have in the polls.

The regional electoral contest was put to the public as a plebiscite, from which an independence referendum is supposed to follow. Even if a referendum was outlawed, nothing could impede the parties in favour of a referendum from running for an election with 'independence' as a single slogan (actually, as it happens, the Second Spanish Republic (1931-39) was called after an electoral defeat in a municipal election). If successful, the independence of a net contributor to the EU budget would take the debate on the potential internal enlargement of the European Union to a new level. It would also ultimately test the democratic credentials of the EU as a project of political, as well as economic liberalisation. More important, however, is the question of what factors and grievances have triggered the conflict. What really happened on November 25<sup>th</sup>? What is the message of the electoral result?



Credit: Paco Rivière (Creative Commons BY SA)

already watered down **Catalan Statute of Autonomy**). Together with political neglect, the economic downturn has revealed the contradictions of an ill-designed fiscal redistribution (that, for instance, allows the disposable income of some net receptor regions to exceed that of net contributor regions, and that gives rise to fiscal imbalances of an unparalleled magnitude unless we look at capital regions such as London). Finally, there is an identity question; during the last quarter of a century, Spanish democracy has failed to grant the Catalan language official status at a European level. Hence, both political, financial and identity reasons explain the massive and unprecedented

Spain is, by any standard, a textbook example of a country that should be organised as a federal or confederal state due to the existing heterogeneity in regional identities and languages. Understandably, the federalisation of Spain has always been the "first best" strategy for Catalans from the very beginning. In fact, since the advent of democracy, independence has only been contemplated seriously as a "second best" solution in the last few years. Hence, the rise of Catalan separatism can only be understood as the direct consequence of a "federalist fiasco" (after the Spanish Constitutional court outlawed an

demonstration that took place last September, where 1.5 million people **took to the streets of Barcelona**.

## What happened last Sunday?

As carefully described in Jonathan Hopkin's recent **EUROPPE article**, the results of the recent Catalan election indicate an overall level of support of 64.4 per cent (87 seats) for those parties that support an independence referendum. Paradoxically though, the incumbent liberal conservative coalition party (CiU) lost 12 seats which drifted to the openly separatist left republican party (ERC) that has now become the second largest party in the Catalan Parliament for the first time during Spain's democracy (with 21 seats). A new radical left separatist party also took 3 seats. In contrast, traditional unionist parties such as the conservative Popular Party (PP) and the Socialist Party (PSC) did not receive any major boost (with the exception of a small regional party), which would have been the expected reaction had the separatist project not been supported by the Catalan population. Surprisingly, the Socialist (PSC) Party, the only party that still proposes a federalist solution, lost 8 seats and its position as opposition leader.

So, the election has done nothing but confirm that there is a majority in the Catalan parliament in favour of holding a referendum. However, the rise of left wing parties should be put in the context of significant spending cuts, with civil servant salaries being slashed 15 per cent in only a year, co-payments for drugs being introduced to contain expenditure, and additional cuts in education. The incumbent CiU party that is now calling for a referendum has, traditionally, been a moderate party without an established independence platform, reducing the levels of trust it enjoys with the separatist movement. The fact that the party still plays a lobbying role on behalf of Catalan business nurtures an additional distrust, coupled with unlawful accusations of corruption by a major Spanish newspaper (El Mundo).

## And the message is...

The message from this election is that the project of secession has a remarkable mandate, but it will have to be built through a coalition of interests, as opposed to a single party project. Proponents of such a major institutional reform need to define beforehand how independence will improve the lives of Catalans, and more specifically what kind of welfare state they will design. If Catalan independence encompasses either 'working harder for lower salaries', or accepting the progressive deterioration of an underfunded public health and education system, the project might not fly. Hence, one could argue that the spirit for independence exists, but its substance is still to be defined.

*Please read our comments policy before commenting.*

*Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of EUROPPE – European Politics and Policy, nor of the London School of Economics.*

Shortened URL for this post: <http://bit.ly/Sqaki0>

---

## About the author



**Joan Costa i Font** – LSE European Institute / Department of Social Policy

Joan Costa i Font is a Reader in Political Economy at LSE. His main research interest is in political economy (theoretically grounded 'economic and public policy analysis') and applied economics (more specifically in the areas of health and social economics). His main academic responsibilities include being stream convener of the MPA public and social policy, co-editing the journal *Applied Economics*,

*Perspectives and Policy* (a leading journal in applied economics), and assisting a range of academic journals.

---

November 28th, 2012 | [Democracy, identity and culture](#), [EU enlargement](#), [Joan Costa i Font](#), [Spain](#),

[West Europe](#) | [1 Comment](#)

---

3